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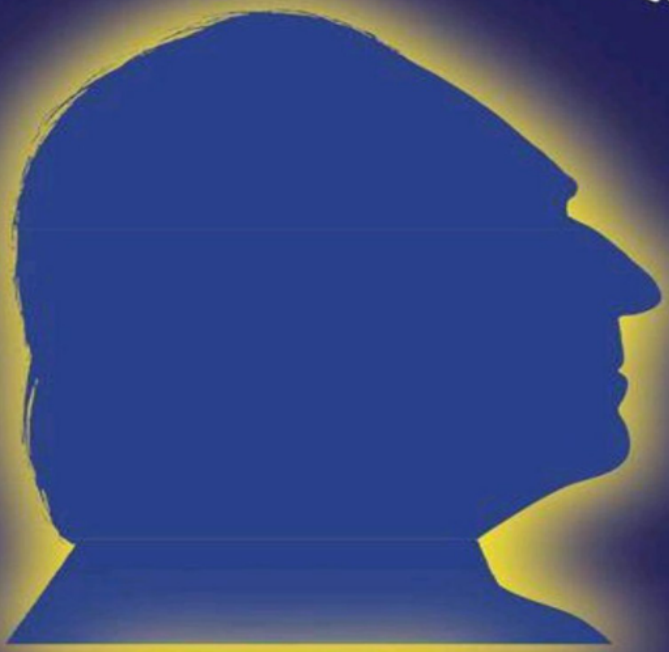

EOIN COLFER

A BIG HAND FOR THE DOCTOR

BBC

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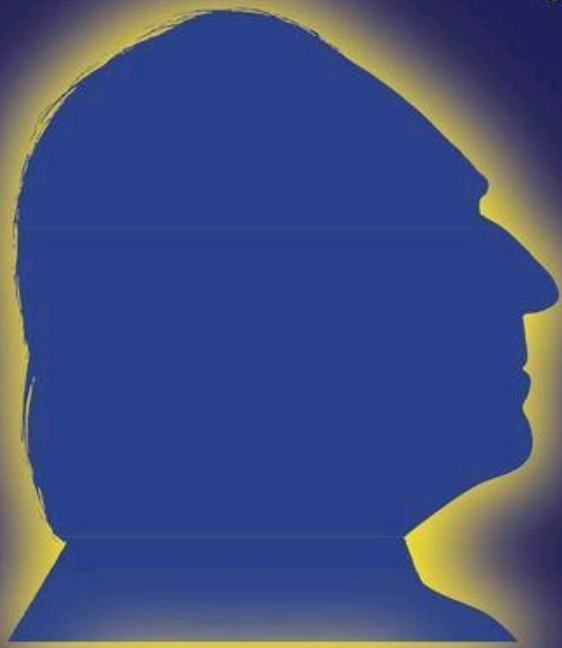

EOIN COLFER

A BIG HAND FOR THE DOCTOR

PUFFIN

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About Eoin Colfer

Eoin Colfer was born and raised in the south-east of Ireland. Artemis Fowl, his first book featuring the young anti-hero, was an immediate international bestseller and won several prestigious awards. He has written a number of other successful books for both adults and children, including Half Moon

Investigations, The Supernaturalist and Airman. His new book, WARP: The Reluctant Assassin, is the first book in a major new series and publishes in April 2013. He lives with his family in Ireland.

Find out more about Eoin at www.eoincolfer.com

Books by Eoin Colfer

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Half Moon Investigations

The Supernaturalist

The Wish List

Benny and Babe

Benny and Omar

The Artemis Fowl series:

Artemis Fowl

Artemis Fowl and the Arctic Incident

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The Legend of the Worst Boy in the World

Coming in 2013:

WARP: The Reluctant Assassin

1

The Strand, London, 1900

The Doctor was not happy with his new bio-hybrid hand.

'Preposterous. It's not even a proper hand,' he complained to Aldridge. 'There are only two fingers, which is rather fewer than the traditional humanoid quota.'

Aldridge was not one to put up with any guff, even from a Time Lord.

'Give it back then. No one's forcing you to take it.'

The Doctor scowled. He knew Aldridge's bartering style, and at this point the Xing surgeon usually threw out a red herring to distract the customer.

'Would you like to know why I closed my practice on Gallifrey?' Aldridge asked.

Red herring delivered as expected. Every time he turned to Aldridge for help, this story was trotted out.

‘Was it our title perhaps?’ the Doctor enquired innocently.

‘Exactly,’ said Aldridge. ‘Call yourselves Time Lords? How pompous is that? Someone previously

registered Temporal Emperors, had they? A pity, you could have shortened it to Temperors.’

Temperors, thought the Doctor. That’s almost amusing.

Amusing because a Time Lord known as the Interior Designer had once famously suggested that

exact title at a conference and been nicknamed Bad Temperor for the rest of his quantum days.

But the Doctor could not allow even a glimmer of a nostalgic smile to show on his lips – firstly

because smiles tended to look like a death rictus on his long face and secondly because Aldridge

would exploit the moment to drive up his price.

‘Five fingers, Aldridge,’ he insisted. ‘I need an entire hand just to do up my shirt in the mornings.

Humans put buttons in the most awkward places even when they are quite aware that Velcro exists.’

He checked his pocket watch. ‘Or rather, will exist in half a century or so.’

Aldridge pinged one of the curved ceramic digits with a scalpel. ‘The exoskeleton has two fingers, I will grant you that, Doctor, but the glove has five, including the thumb, all controlled by signals from the exoskeleton. A bloomin’ bio-hybrid miracle.’

The Doctor was impressed, but would not allow himself to show it. ‘I’d rather have a bio-bio

miracle if it’s all the same to you. And I am in a dreadful hurry.’

‘Come back in five days,’ said Aldridge. ‘Your flesh and bone hand will

be ready by then. All I

need is a sample.' He thrust a specimen jar under the Doctor's nose. 'Spit if you don't mind.'

The Doctor obliged, feeling more than a little relieved that spittle was all Aldridge needed from

him. Some time ago, after the whole Inscrutable Doppelgänger fiasco, he'd been forced to part with two litres of very rare TL-positive blood from which to work up plasma.

'Five days? You couldn't get the job done with a little more urgency, could you?'

Aldridge shrugged. 'Sorry. I have a cluster of amphibi-men in the back, all hissing for their tail extensions. It's setting me back a fortune to hire a fire truck to keep 'em lubricated.'

The Doctor stared Aldridge down until the portly Xing surgeon relented.

'Very well. Two days. But it's gonna cost you.'

Ah yes, thought the Doctor, preparing himself for bad news. 'How much exactly is it going to cost

me?'

Although how much was perhaps the wrong term to use as Aldridge usually dealt in commodities

rather than currencies.

The surgeon scratched the bristles that dotted his chin like the quills of a porcupine. If ever one of Victorian London's cads, scoundrels, dippers or muck snipes stepped inside Aldridge's Clockwork

Repair and Restoration hoping to light-foot it down the Strand with a couple of glittering fobs, they would have had a nasty surprise. For Aldridge could balloon his cheeks and expel one of those venom-laden bristles with a speed and accuracy comparable to that of the rainforest nomads of Borneo

wielding their blowpipes. The villain would wake up six hours later, chained to the Newgate Prison railings with very fuzzy memories of the previous few days. Prison warders had taken to calling these

occasional deliveries ‘Stork Babies’.

The Doctor pointed pointedly at Aldridge’s chin. ‘Are you trying to intimidate me, Aldridge? Is that a threat?’

Aldridge laughed and his beard rippled. ‘Oh, come on, Doctor. This right here is the fun of it. The barter and such. Our little game.’

The Doctor’s face was unreadable. ‘Even if I hadn’t lost one of my hands, I would not be smiling

like an idiot. I don’t laugh. I don’t play games. I have a serious mission.’

‘You used to laugh,’ rebutted Aldridge. ‘Remember that thing with the homicidal earthworms?

Hilarious, was it not?’

‘Those earthworms excreted nitrous oxide,’ said the Doctor, ‘known on Earth as laughing gas, so I

was laughing against my will. I do not usually indulge in merriment. The universe is a serious place and I left my granddaughter watching a house.’

Aldridge spread his fingers on the desk. ‘Very well, and I only make this offer because of the

wonderful Susan. What I require for the rental of the bio-hybrid and the growth of a new hand in my vat of magic is . . .’ He paused, for even Aldridge knew what he was about to ask would not be

swallowed easily by a Time Lord who did not possess a sense of humour. ‘One week of your time.’

The Doctor didn’t understand for a moment.

‘One week of my time?’ Then the penny-farthing dropped. ‘You want me to be your assistant.’

‘Just for the week.’

‘Seven days? You want me as your assistant for seven whole days?’

‘You hand over your time and I hand over . . . a hand. I have a really important repeat client that needs a job done. Having a smart fellow

like yourself at my elbow would help a lot.'

The Doctor pinched his brow with his remaining hand. 'It's not possible. My time is precious.'

'You could always regenerate,' suggested Aldridge innocently. 'Maybe the next guy will have a

better sense of humour, not to mention sense of fashion.'

The Doctor bristled, though not as dramatically as Aldridge did on occasion.

'This outfit has been chosen by computer so that I may blend in with the locals. Fashion has nothing to do with it. In fact, fashion obsession is the sort of frivolous distraction that gets people –'

The Doctor did not complete his sentence and the surgeon chose not to complete it for him, though

they both knew that killed was the missing word. The Doctor did not want to say it in case putting voice to the word would bring death itself, and there had been too much death in the Doctor's life.

Aldridge knew this and took pity.

'Very well, Doctor. In return for four days of your time, I will grow a hand for you. I cannot and will not say fairer than that.'

The Doctor was grudgingly mollified. 'Four days, you say? I have your word on that, as a fellow

visitor to this planet?'

'You have my word as a Xing surgeon. I can drop the hand at your TARDIS if you like. Where are

you parked?'

'Over in Hyde Park.'

'You keeping your nose outta the smog? Actually I think I've got a few noses here if you fancy

something less . . . pronounced.'

This was veering towards small talk and the Doctor had never cared

too much for small talk or chit-chat. As for gossip and prattle, he loathed them both.

‘Four days,’ he repeated. The Doctor raised the stump of his left wrist upon which used to sit his left hand and without another word pressed the bio-hybrid claw-like fingers into the Xing surgeon’s chest.

Aldridge regarded the action in silence and raised his bushy eyebrows high until the Doctor was

forced to ask, ‘Could you please attach the temporary bio-hybrid hand?’

Aldridge took a sonic scalpel from his belt.

‘Careful with that,’ said the Doctor. ‘No need to get carried away.’

Aldridge spun the scalpel like a baton. ‘Yessir. Careful is my middle name. Actually Clumsy is my

middle name, but that doesn’t encourage clients and it makes me sound like one of those dwarfs that are going to be so popular when moving pictures get going.’

The Doctor did not respond, or move for that matter, as Aldridge was already working on his arm,

attaching the temporary hybrid hand to his wrist and slicing away the burned nub of flesh and seeking out nerve endings.

Incredible, thought the Doctor. He seems to be barely paying attention and I can’t feel a thing.

Of course, that was the trademark of Xing-Monastery-trained surgeons – their incredible speed and

accuracy. The Doctor had once heard a story about how acolytes were woken in the middle of a dark

night by the pain of their own big toe being amputated by a professor. They were then timed on how long it took to reattach the toe using only the innards of a dental-floss packet, three lizard clips and a jar of glow-worms.

Hogwarts, it is not, thought the Doctor, realising that no one would appreciate this reference for almost a century.

Within minutes the surgeon was tugging on the thought-responsive plasti-skin glove and stepping

back to admire his work.

‘Well, give ’er a wiggle.’

The Doctor did so and discovered, to his embarrassment, that the fingernails were painted.

‘Would this, by any chance, be a lady’s hand?’

‘Yep,’ confessed Aldridge. ‘But she was a big lady. Very manly like yourself. Hated laughing and

such, so you two should get on very well.’

‘Two days,’ said the Doctor, pointing a finger tipped by a curved nail coated with ruby lacquer.

Aldridge tried so hard to hold back a fit of giggles that one of his bristles thunked into the wall.

‘Sorry, Mister Time Lord, sir. But it’s really difficult to take you seriously wearing nail polish.’

The Doctor curled his fake fingers into a fist, straightened his Astrakhan hat and resolved to acquire a pair of gloves as soon as possible.

Aldridge passed the Doctor his cane.

‘You never said how you lost the hand?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘I didn’t. If you must know, I was duelling a Soul Pirate who wounded me

with a heated blade. If the blade hadn’t cauterised the wound, I think you’d be looking at a different Doctor right now. Of course, I managed to compartmentalise the pain through sheer concentration.’

‘Soul Pirates,’ sniffed Aldridge. ‘I won’t even serve those animals. They’re barred on principle.’

‘Hmmmph,’ said the Doctor, pulling his army greatcoat close to his throat. He might have said bah

humbug, but that catchphrase already belonged to somebody else.

2

The Strand was filled with crowds of hawkers, and feral children who trekked daily from London's

rookeries to follow moneyed gents the way iron filings follow a magnet, and red-cheeked revellers

spilling on to the street outside the infamous Dog and Duck pub. If anyone had noted the elderly

curmudgeon striding along towards Charing Cross, they would have noticed nothing strange about this gent, apart from the fact that he was staring at his own left hand with some surprise, as though it had spoken to him.

A retired army man they may have guessed, nodding at his overcoat and his measured gait.

A world traveller perhaps people might have surmised due to his Russian hat.

Or an eccentric scientist – this inferred from the bolts of white hair crackling in his wake, not to mention the ivory handle of a magnifying glass poking from his pocket.

No one would have known that there was a Time Lord in their midst that evening. Nobody except

his granddaughter, Susan, who was possibly the only person in the universe who could make the

Doctor smile at the mere thought of her.

There were numerous things that did not make the Doctor smile: chit-chat, answering questions in

times of emergency, answering questions in times of complete calm, the paintings of Gallifreyan

Subjunctivists (confidence tricksters the lot of them), the Earth spread known as Marmite, the human TV show Blake's 7, which was patently ludicrous, and the clammy, pungent squeeze of a Victorian

London crowd. Londoners endured a signature aroma composed of

two parts raw sewage, one part coal

smoke and one part unwashed-body odour. The great stink knew no master and was sniffed from

queen to washerwoman. This stink could be exacerbated by summer heat or prevailing winds and the

Doctor thought that there was not a smell that he despised more in the entire universe.

By the time he reached Charing Cross, the Doctor could stand the stench no longer and so hailed a

hansom. He refused the cabbie's offer of half a sandwich, pressed an air-filter mask concealed behind a kerchief to his face, and hunched down low on his bench to discourage the cabbie from asking any further questions. The Doctor ignored the journey, including the detour round Piccadilly where a milk truck had overturned, spilling its load across the avenue, and he gave his mind to the problem that had cost him many nights' sleep and, more recently, his left hand.

The Soul Pirates were abominable creatures: a rag-tag rabble of the universe's humanoid species

with only two things in common. One, as mentioned, they were approximately human in appearance;

and, two, they cared not a jot for the lives of others. The Soul Pirates had a very specific modus operandi: they chose a planet where the inhabitants did not yet have hyperspace capabilities, then hovered in the clouds above and sent down a jockey, riding an anti-gravity tractor beam loaded with a soporific agent into the rooms of sleeping children. The anti-grav beam was clever, but the soporific agent in the beam was genius, because, even if the victims did wake up, the sedative would allow their brains to concoct some fantastic fairy-tale and so they would willingly allow themselves to be spirited away. They believed themselves able to fly, or saw the beam jockey as a glamorous adventurer who

desperately needed their help. In any event, there was no struggle or hoo-hah, and, most importantly, the merchandise was not damaged. When the kidnapped children were drawn into the pirates' ship,

they were either sent to the engine room and hooked to brain-drain helmets, or chopped up for organ and body parts, which the pirates

would transplant on to or into themselves. Nothing was wasted, not a toenail, not an electron, hence the bandits' moniker: the Soul Pirates.

The Doctor had relentlessly hunted the pirates across time and space. It had become his mission, his obsession. According to his galactic network, the crew who had taken his hand were the only ones still operating on Earth. He had last tangled with them in this exact city and now the TARDIS had detected their anti-grav signature here again. For the pirates it would be twenty years since their captain sliced off the Doctor's left hand, but for the Time Lord, having jumped years ahead in the TARDIS, it was a very fresh wound indeed.

This was what Susan would call a break. Soul-Pirate ships often eluded authorities for centuries

because they had impenetrable shields, making it difficult to track them down.

They must have lost one of their protective plates, surmised the Doctor. And that had made the

pirates visible for a few minutes, before they effected repairs. Plenty of time for the TARDIS to find them. Well done, old girl.

Unfortunately, whatever hole had allowed the pirate ship's signature to leak had now been plugged

and the Doctor couldn't know if the pirates were still hovering above Hyde Park, hidden in the cloud banks, or off to their next port of call. A typical pirate crew had over a hundred streets that they revisited in random order. But the pirates had a tendency to revisit good harvesting sites. So if

someone really wished to track them down, all they needed was determination and lots of time.

And I have both, thought the Doctor. Plus a resourceful granddaughter.

Sometimes too resourceful. Perhaps it would be wise to check in on Susan, after all. Sometimes it

seemed as though she wilfully ignored specific instructions because, as she put it, it seemed the right thing to do.

And, while it often was the right thing to do morally, it was rarely

correct from a tactical

standpoint.

Just as the Doctor thought to call Susan, she must have thought to contact him as his wrist

communicator vibrated to signal the arrival of a message. Surprisingly it buzzed a second time, then a third. Several more urgent buzzes followed.

The Doctor checked the small screen to see a dozen messages all from Susan coming through at the

same time. How could that be? He had designed and built these communicators himself. They could

broadcast through time if need be.

Then it hit him.

Stupid. Stupid. How could he not have foreseen this?

Aldridge was off-radar in this city. He would obviously have set up a series of jamming dishes.

Anyone scanning the planet would find no trace of the surgeon or his gadgetry.

Susan had been trying to get through all evening, but he had been inside the jammed zone.

The Doctor scrolled to the last message, which had come through only seconds before, and clicked

play.

'Grandfather,' said Susan's voice, breathy and he could hear her feet pounding as she ran. 'I can't wait any more. The beam has hit number fourteen as you predicted. Repeat, number fourteen. I have to help those children, Grandfather. There is no one else. Please come quick. Hurry, Grandfather, hurry.'

The Doctor cursed himself for being a fool, threw some coins in the cabbie's general direction and shouted at the man to make haste for the Kensington Gardens end of Hyde Park.

She was supposed to wait. I told her to wait. Why must she be so foolhardy?

As they neared the row of terraced townhouses at the end of the park, the Doctor played through the rest of Susan's messages hoping for some information that might help him rescue her and the

children.

From what he could gather, Susan had befriended three children in the park and managed to glean

that their parents had gone to Switzerland to a revolutionary new spa because of the father's nervous problems. Fearful of the curse, they had left one Captain Douglas, a soldier of the Queen's own guard, in charge of the children to protect them.

The curse. The family, like many others, believed that children went missing because of a curse.

The Doctor could see the signature tawny orange light of the pirates' beam entering the house. He

jumped out of the hansom cab, then ran along a footpath lit by the firefly glow of gas lamps, and up the steps of number fourteen. The door was typically Victorian: solid and unbreakable by a shoulder charge.

How about my bio-hybrid hand? thought the Doctor, deciding to put Aldridge's technology to the

test.

With barely a pause he punched the door with his left hand, middle knuckle striking the brass-

ringed keyhole, and in spite of the circumstances he felt a moment's gratification when the metal lock crumpled beneath the blow and the surrounding wooden panel literally exploded into splinters. One of his fake glove fingers did split like an overcooked sausage but the Doctor knew that Aldridge would understand. Susan's life was at stake after all.

He barged into the hall and straight up the stairs, looking neither right nor left. The pirates would come in on the top storey, directly into the bedroom. The Doctor knew which bedroom because of a

glow emanating from under the door, and he heard a dull buzz like a far-off, agitated beehive.

The anti-gravity beam.

I am too late. Susan, my dear.

With a cry that was almost animal, the Doctor split the fake thumb smashing open the bedroom

door, and what he saw in there nearly stopped both of his Time Lord hearts.

It was the type of bedroom one would expect in a normal upper-class Kensington townhouse:

patterned velvet wallpaper, prints framed on the wall – and an orange beam retreating through the bay windows like a spooked snake. Perhaps in the world outside the Doctor's, the orange beam was less

than normal.

Susan was suspended in the air, floating out through the window, a dreamy smile on her lovely

young face.

'Grandfather,' she called to him. Her movements were slow as though underwater. 'I have found

Mummy. I am going to see her now, do come with me. Take my hand, Grandfather.'

The Doctor almost took the proffered hand, but to do so would have meant entering the beam, just

as Susan's compassion for the children had caused her to do, and it was too early because the minute he took a breath in the beam the soporific agent would affect him too, and even Time Lords can only hold their breath for so long.

Beyond Susan, the Doctor saw a cluster of figures suspended by the beam.

The children and guard have been taken. I must save them all and somehow end this tonight.

And so the Doctor skirted the beam, ignoring Susan's pleas, though they were breaking his heart,

and climbed through a side window on to the roof where there was a Soul Pirate with a large sword

waiting to catch a ride back to his ship on the tail end of the anti-grav beam. The pirate was huge and bare to the waist, his skin a patchwork of grafts and scarring. His too-large head was completely

shaved apart from a braided lock, which stood erect on his crown like an exclamation mark.

Mano-a-mano, thought the Doctor, grimly. And that pirate is a much bigger mano than I am.

3

The Doctor and the Soul Pirate faced each other across an expanse of slick grey slate. The wind

churned the mist into maelstroms and the great expanse of space yawned overhead. The Doctor's hat

was snatched from his head and sent spinning over the hotchpotch of pitched roofs into a coal bunker thirty feet below.

Where I shall probably soon follow, the Doctor realised, but he had no alternative but to engage this pirate fellow. After all, the grotesque creature stood between him and his granddaughter.

'Igby kill white-hair,' said the foul creature from between clenched teeth. He was presumably

referring to himself in the third person, and referring to the Doctor according to his hair colour, not randomly informing the Doctor of the existence of a man called Igby who had something against

white hair.

'Release your prisoners,' the Doctor shouted into the wind. 'You don't have to live this way. You

can be at peace.'

And even though the Doctor had always abhorred weapons, he wished he had something a little

more substantial than a walking stick to fend off the blows that were coming his way.

‘I like white hair. He funny,’ shouted Igby, his own booming voice penetrating the elements. ‘Come die, old man.’

There is an excellent chance that I will do just that, thought the Doctor grimly. But despite the odds I simply must not lose. Sometimes there is more to life than the odds.

The orange anti-grav beam pulsed, scorching a cylinder through the London fog, silhouettes of

brainwashed abductees floating in its depths, dreamily certain that they were flying to their own

tailor-made heavens.

Jolly adventures, trees to climb, heroes all.

How long would that fantasy sustain them before the reality of the Soul Pirates’ ship manifested?

The Doctor advanced cautiously, picking his way along the slick ridge, keeping his cane extended

all the while. As soon as he stepped out from behind the chimney, the full force of the elements

battered him with sideswipes of wind and tacks of icy rain. He struggled to keep his balance on the treacherous slating, and each time a loose tile slipped from its moorings and smashed on the cobbles below the Doctor remembered the danger he was in.

Though one is hardly likely to forget.

Igby waited for him, his eyes ablaze with bloodlust, twirling his sword in complicated patterns that deflated the Doctor’s optimism with every revolution.

This alien is an expert killer. A mercenary. How can I, a pacifist with a stick, hope to defeat him?

The answer was obvious.

Igby was a beam jockey, that much was clear from the faint orange tinge to his skin, which

reminded the Doctor (if one can be reminded of the future) of the pungent, toxic goo twenty-first-

century ladies chose to slather on their skin in the name of tan. Beam jockeys were impervious to the soporific agent inside the anti-grav beam but long-term exposure did give their IQs a bit of a

battering.

So, Igby appeared to be strong and fast, but maybe a little dim.

So, thought the Doctor, I use tactics.

Do the unexpected.

Closer they drew. On the face of it, the Doctor was totally outmatched. The pirate Igby was in his prime and packed solid with muscle. Igby's teeth were golden and the heavy slab of his naked chest bore a tattoo of the Soul Pirates' motto: We Never Land.

The Doctor noticed Igby's shadow flicker and shift, and realised the anti-grav beam was retracting towards the ship. If that happened, all hope would be lost. Even if Susan survived and he did find her again, she would be a different person – her wonderful spirit broken.

'No!' he cried. 'I will not permit it.'

Igby laughed, jerking his head at the Doctor as if informing an invisible friend that this old man was crazy. Then he too noticed the beam retracting, and realised that he had better finish up here or he could find himself stranded on Earth.

'Sorry, old man. No play now, just kill dead with sword.'

Igby rushed the Doctor, covering the space between them in two strides. The Doctor held his cane in front of him protectively, but Igby bashed it away with his silver wrist-guard.

'Fool,' spat Igby, spittle spattering through layers of teeth, craggy as a mountain range.

He lifted his blade high and brought it down with terrific force towards the Doctor's head. No time for subtleties. The pirate obviously intended to cleave one of the greatest frontal lobes in the universe with an almighty blow. Though the Doctor could not know it, this particular move was a favourite of Igby's, and the tattooed lines on his

arms did not represent a record of days spent in prison, but rather the number of heads he had split, properly witnessed by a minimum of two crewmates.

As he swung, it occurred to Igby that none of his mates was present to credit the killing, so he

turned his head towards the ship just to check if any of the camera stalks at the ship's front were focused on him, and to give the camera a clear shot of his face so there would be no cause for debate.

'Look,' he shouted in the direction of the camera stalks. 'I kill white hair. No problem.'

Igby felt a thunk as expected, but it was somehow different from the signature skull-splitting thunk that generally followed a fatal blow to the noggin.

Igby turned his gaze to the Doctor, and was more than surprised to find that the old man had caught Igby's sword in his left hand.

'Igby,' said Igby. It was the only word that would come to him.

The pirate yanked the sword, but it was trapped in the grip of the Doctor's bio-hybrid hand, so Igby tugged again, this time with all of his considerable strength. The Doctor was lifted off the ground for a moment, then the temporary binding polymer, which secured the bio-hybrid glove to the Doctor's

wrist and was never meant for rooftop shenanigans, simply split with a noise like the twang of a

rubber band. Igby's yank sent him past the point of correction and over backwards.

The Doctor reached out the exposed curved ceramic digits to save the pirate, but Igby was beyond

his reach. All he could do was blink at the appendage stretched out towards him and utter the last word of his despicable life.

'Hook,' he groaned and slid on all fours down the roof and tumbled into the darkness below.

The Doctor regretted the loss of any life, however vile, but there was no time to mourn Igby's death.

The orange tractor beam was withdrawing into the cloud and in mere seconds it would be beyond his

reach. Perhaps it already was.

Oh, how I wish I had already regenerated to become the tall one with the dicky bow, thought the

Doctor, who occasionally had visions of his future selves. He is always so fit and agile. I suppose all that incessant running down corridors that he does . . . will do . . . may do, in one of my possible futures . . . is good for something.

'Stupid blasted sequence of events,' he shouted at the heartless elements. 'Isn't a person supposed to have a reasonable option?'

If the elements did have the answer, they kept it to themselves.

'S'pose not,' muttered the Doctor. 'Better take the unreasonable option then.'

He trotted along the ridge to the nearest chimney, going as quickly as he could before his

subconscious caught on to his lunatic plan and tried to stop him. Up on to the chimney he scrambled, dislodging two clay pots and a bird's nest from its perch. And from there he dived out and was lifted up into the fading glow of the pirates' tractor beam.

4

The anti-gravity beam sucked the Doctor into its belly and he supposed that this was how being eaten must feel. Indeed it was more than mere supposition. He had been eaten twice before, on the same

holiday, by blarph whales in Lake Rhonda who thought it was hilarious to gulp down bathers then pop them out through their blowholes. Then all the whales would surface-high-five each other and have a good old laugh at the bather's expense. The bather would generally take the whole thing in good

spirits – after all, who's going to take issue with a twenty-tonne blarph whale?

The Doctor banished these memories because they were for another time when he was not

suspended in the anti-grav beam of a Soul Pirate frigate.

The Doctor knew he had only moments of total consciousness left before the beam's soporific agent

lulled him into a peaceful sleep, when it would seem as though all his dreams were on the verge of coming to pass. The Doctor shook himself vigorously to stay awake, while at the same time holding

his breath.

Suddenly he was back on Gallifrey, with his family, safe at last.

'That's right,' said his mother and she smiled down at him, her long hair brushing his forehead.

'Stay here, my little Doctor. Stay here with me and you can tell tales of the worlds you have visited. I so want to hear your stories.'

She is so pretty, he thought. Just as I remember her.

'D'Arvit!' swore the Doctor aloud. 'I am being drugged.' He began to describe what was happening

around him just to stay alert.

'There are half a dozen souls trapped in the beam. Three children and three adults, counting Susan as an adult, which I am not sure I should considering the fact that she wilfully disobeyed my

instructions. All able-bodied. The pirates need youth and strength to power their ship. I cannot see Susan's face, though I can feel her joy. I wonder what she sees in her dreams?'

The beam was more than light. It offered resistance when touched and was heavily charged to allow

suspension of dense matter.

'I know we are moving,' continued the Doctor, narrating his journey. 'Yet there is no sensation of movement. No friction whatsoever. I can honestly say that in spite of the ominous circumstances, I have never been so comfortable.'

A slender shape flitted past and the Doctor knew, even from the briefest glimpse, that it was Susan.

He recognised her as surely as an infant recognises the voice of its mother.

‘Susan, my dear!’ he cried, releasing more precious breath, but Susan’s smile never wavered, and

she did not answer.

The Doctor saw in her expression how optimistic about the universe Susan was and he realised how

utterly she would collapse in the Soul Pirates’ hands. That could not be allowed to happen.

They passed through the folded-pastry layers of a puffed-up cumulus and emerged looking at the

stars. The second star on the left winked and crackled suddenly as its cloaking shield was powered down, and where sky had been now hovered the hulking pirate factory ship.

The beam drew them towards the specially modified bay of the mid-size interplanetary-class

frigate. The underside was scored from many close calls with asteroids and weapon fire. The Doctor could clearly see the spot welds where a new plate had recently been attached.

Space gates were cranked open and the Doctor saw that the anti-grav beam had been modified to

fire from inside the ship itself, which was incredibly dangerous if not properly calibrated, but it did allow the Soul Pirates to draw their victims directly into the hold for processing.

‘The anti-grav cannon fires from within the hold,’ said the Doctor, but he could feel himself losing the battle to stay alert. ‘The subjects are drawn inside and often spontaneously and in perfect

synchronisation sing every word of the Monzorian opera “Grunt the Naysayer”.’

Stop it! The Doctor chided himself. Draw your wits about you. Say what you see.

‘The Soul Pirates’ ship works on the same principle as those despicable Orthonian whaling

factories,' he said, feeling a numbness buzz along his arms. 'Once the subjects have been deposited inside the Soul Pirate ship, they are scanned by computer and the ship decides how best to use each one. Most are hooked up to battery rigs and drained of their electricity, but some are sent directly to dissection for their parts. Soul Pirates are humanoids, mostly but not exclusively from the planet Ryger. Their systems are extremely robust and can accept all manner of transplants, even ones from different species, such as Earthlings. With timely transplants a pirate can reasonably expect to live three to four hundred Earth years.'

The giant gates yawned wide and sucked the subjects into a vast abattoir. Rows of meat hooks hung

from the metal ceiling and a couple of pirates stood in rubber aprons ready to hose down the new

arrivals with water cannons. They wore curved heat blades attached to battery packs on their belts in case the computer recommended an instant amputation.

The beam was powered down and its cargo dropped with a thump into a pit on the deck. The Doctor

confirmed that there were four others besides Susan and himself.

Six to save, he thought. And those pirates have the high ground.

As soon as the last gloopy globs of the anti-grav beam had faded, the Soul Pirates cranked up their hoses and turned them on their latest victims, blasting Susan, the Doctor and the four others into a heaped hotchpotch of limbs and torsos in the corner of the pit.

The pirates laughed. 'They so stupid,' said one. 'Look, I spray them again.'

Pummelled by water on two sides, the Doctor could barely breathe. He was effectively blind and

couldn't have fought back if he wanted to. But he didn't want to. When your enemy believes you to be unconscious, let them continue to do so until you gain a tactical advantage.

Or plainly put: play dead until they come close.

The second pirate dropped his hose and checked a computer console

with big coloured buttons.

‘Ship say beep, Gomb,’ he said, puzzled. ‘What beep mean?’

What beep mean? Obviously the pirates kept the slower members of their crew on the lower decks.

In the case of Igby, probably below decks.

Gomb clipped the hose nozzle on to a special hook on his belt and hurried to check the screen.

‘Special beep!’ he exclaimed. ‘We got Time Lords. Computer say Time Lords. Brains worth many

money pieces. Big blobby brains.’

Even buried under a mound of bodies in an abattoir, the Doctor found a moment to take offence.

Blobby brain, indeed.

Gomb squinted at the heaped pile of sleeping bodies. ‘Which one?’

‘Lay them out,’ ordered his companion. ‘I tell Cap’n face to face and maybe get grog bottle for we two. You find Time Lords.’

The Doctor tried to pull his limbs from their entanglement so he would have some chance in a

physical struggle, but he was stuck fast, pinned at the bottom of a body pile, his face a metre from Susan’s. Her eyes were open now, and he could see her consciousness return.

She is frightened, he thought. I cannot allow her to die here.

But Susan was not dead yet and neither was the Doctor.

‘Grandfather,’ she whispered. ‘What can we do?’

‘Shhhh,’ said the Doctor gently, wishing he could give her some encouragement, but if anything

there was worse to come before things got better, which they probably would not. ‘Dream a while.’

Pirate Gomb jumped down into the pit, his boots striking the deck

with a clang. He sauntered across the closed space doors to where valuable Time Lords were waiting with blobby brains. Gomb sang in a surprisingly pure tenor as he walked, which was about as unexpected as hearing a quantum physics

lecture from the mouth of a lemming.

‘Grog, grog,

Swallow it down,

She cures constipation

She up-turns yer frown.’

The Doctor thought that maybe Gomb had composed this classic himself.

Up-turns?

Gomb reached the body pile and hauled off two sleeping children, laying them out side by side and

straightening their clothes.

‘Yer going to meet Cap’n,’ he said. ‘Look yer best for Cap’n and maybe he just drain yer soul ’stead of slicing you up for parts.’

The pirate returned to the pile and bent towards Susan.

This was as far as he got because the Doctor had reached up and yanked the release switch on the

hose on Gomb’s belt. This was not as precise a plan as the Doctor would have liked, but if he had

estimated the hose’s pressure correctly, and providing the pirate’s belt did not break, the result should be advantageous for the prisoners.

Advantageous was one way of putting it: Gomb had barely a moment to register what was

happening when the hose bucked as water pressure ran along it, then lifted Gomb bodily into the air, wrapped its coils around him and sent him spinning down a corridor, out of sight.

The Doctor knew that he had seconds before their escape attempt was

known to everyone on the

ship. They were probably under video surveillance right now.

He crawled out from underneath the sleeping humans and turned to Susan.

‘My dear,’ he said, wiping her eyes, ‘are you hurt?’

‘No,’ she said, but she was terrified. The Doctor could see it dawn on her what happened here as she stared raptly at the meat hooks swaying from the ceiling.

‘Susan, listen to me,’ said the Doctor, taking her face in his hands – well, one hand and a claw. ‘I will get us out, but you need to help me. Do you understand?’

Susan nodded. ‘Of course, Grandfather. I can help.’

‘That’s my girl. Drag the others into the centre of the space gates. Inside the circle.’

‘Inside the circle.’

‘As quick as you can, Susan. We have mere moments before reinforcements arrive.’

Susan began her task of pulling the other captives inside the circle. They slid across the slick deck easily enough, even the adult, who was clad in a soldier’s uniform.

The Doctor’s sodden greatcoat made him feel as though he was wearing a bear, so he shrugged it off and hurried up the steps to the console. The controls were set to Rygerian, which the Doctor could understand well enough, but he switched the language to Earth English and locked the preferences,

which might give them another second or two when they needed it.

The Doctor had always been a finger-and-thumb typist so working with a claw didn’t hinder him too

much. He ran a search of the vessel for captives and found none besides his own group. Yesterday’s abductees had already been disposed of, which made the Doctor feel a lot better about the action he had decided to take.

He circumvented the pirate craft's basic security codes and quickly reset the anti-grav beam

parameters and door controls. Once the computer had accepted his overriding commands, the Doctor

set such a complicated password that it would take either ten years or a miracle to get this computer to perform any task more complicated than playing solitaire.

The pirates did not have ten years, and the universe certainly did not owe them a miracle.

Susan had managed to gather the prisoners on the circle in the centre of the bay doors. The soldier was attempting to stand and the smallest child, a boy, was being violently ill on his own shoes. The Doctor swept him up in his arms, ignoring the squeals of protest.

'Quickly,' he said. 'All together now. You must lay your hands on me.'

He may as well have been talking to monkeys. These humans were in the middle of a transition

from paradise to hell. If they were fortunate, it was possible that their minds would heal, but at the moment it was all they could do to breathe.

Only Susan had her wits about her. She hugged the Doctor with one arm, the soldier with another

and gathered a boy and a girl who might have been twins between her knees.

'Good girl,' said the Doctor, hoisting the ill boy on to his shoulders. 'That's my girl.' They were all connected now: a circuit.

'Whatever happens, we do not break the circuit!'

Susan nodded, hugging her grandfather fiercely. 'I won't let go.'

'I know you won't,' said the Doctor.

Seconds passed and the Doctor began to fret that he had allowed too long on the timer. The pirates would be upon them at any moment. In fact the approaching ruckus echoing down the corridor

suggested that this moment had arrived.

A dozen or more pirates fell over each other to access the cargo bay, training their weapons on the Doctor and his fellow captives. But they did not fire. Why would they? These prisoners represented a night's work. By the looks of it they had managed to surprise Gomb, but a jack-in-the-box could

surprise Gomb, he was so stupid. And what could the prisoners do now? Outnumbered, surrounded and

unarmed? There was nothing for them to do but accept their fate.

The Captain elbowed his way to the front of the pack. He was a fearsome specimen. Three metres

tall with a flat, grey-scaled face, deep-set glittering eyes and a long scar vertically bisecting his face.

'The Time Lord,' he bellowed, and it sounded as though someone had taught a rhinoceros to talk.

'Where is the Time Lord?'

'I am here,' said the Doctor, checking by touch and sight that the band of Earthlings was still

connected.

The Captain's laugh was uncharacteristically high-pitched for such a large person.

'It is you, Doctor,' he said, touching the scar on his face. 'You should not have come back.'

The Doctor noticed that the Captain wore a shrunken hand on a cord around his neck.

That is my hand, the fiend!

'I had unfinished business,' said the Doctor, counting down from five in his head.

'We both have unfinished business,' said the Captain.

Generally the Doctor was not in favour of rejoinders or snappy one-liners but this captain was a vile specimen and so he treated himself to the last word.

‘Our business is now finished,’ the Doctor said, and the space doors opened beneath them, dropping the Doctor and his group into the black of night, three thousand metres above the glowing gas-lights of London.

The Captain was disappointed that he would not get to personally enjoy harvesting the Doctor’s

organs, but the fact that the Time Lord would be dead in a matter of seconds cheered him somewhat.

There was one little thing that niggled at him, though: if the Doctor had set the space doors to open, what other computer settings could he have fiddled with?

He barged to the nearest screen and was greeted by complicated unfamiliar text running in ever-

decreasing circles.

‘Doctor!’ he bellowed. ‘What have you done?’

As if to answer his question, the anti-grav cannon fired off one short fat squib through the closing space doors. Just one burst that grazed the doors on its way out before they clanged shut.

Lucky for me, thought the Captain. He did not think lucky for us, as he was a selfish and tyrannical captain who would sell his entire crew to a body farm to buy himself an extra minute of life.

Because if the anti-grav cannon was ever fired when the space doors were closed it would be the

end of the entire ship.

Again it seemed as though the computer could read his mind as it diverted every spark of energy

into the cannon and unloaded it directly at the sealed space doors.

The Doctor and his party plummeted to Earth, although it felt as though London was rushing upwards to meet them. There was no room in their lives for thought now. Life had been reduced to the most

basic of urges: survival. And if they did survive tonight, any of them, then their lives would never be the same. They would have been to the brink, peered into the abyss and lived to speak of it. Only the

Doctor maintained something of his faculties, as near-death experiences were more or less his

speciality.

They fell in a ragged bunch, held together by death grips and tangled limbs. Somehow in the middle of the jumbled chaos, the Doctor and Susan came face to face. The Doctor tried to smile, but air

rushed between his lips and ballooned his cheeks.

I cannot even smile for my beautiful granddaughter.

He saw it coming from the corner of one eye, an orange bloom in the sky above them.

Physics, don't fail me now, he thought. Then: Physics cannot fail, but my calculations could be

flawed.

The bloom blossomed and became a bolt, which shot towards them with unerring accuracy, leaving

a wake of fairy sparks behind it.

The Doctor pulled everyone tight, hugging them to him.

Live or die. This moment decides.

The anti-grav pulse enveloped the small band, and slowed their descent in a series of jarring hops and sputters. The Doctor found himself floating on his back watching the pirate ship list from the side of a large cloud bank. Eight storeys of wounded metal.

They deserve this, he told himself. I am saving the lives of children and avenging many more.

But still he turned away when the anti-grav ray he'd instructed the computer to fire began to eat the ship from the inside, changing the very atomic structure of the craft until its molecules disbanded and became at one with the air.

Susan hugged him tight and cried on his shoulder.

They would survive.

They would all be fine.

5

Aldridge was mildly surprised.

‘The Doctor defeated a whole crew of Soul Pirates? Single-handed, if you’ll pardon the

expression?’

Susan flicked her nail against something on Aldridge’s work bench that looked very much like a

miniature TARDIS.

‘Yes, my grandfather took care of them. He coded the ship’s anti-grav beam to his own DNA so the

blast from the beam locked on to him and therefore us. Genius, really.’

Aldridge moved the tiny TARDIS away from Susan’s fingers. ‘There is a giant octo-shark in there

and I don’t think he’d be impressed with you flicking his box.’

‘An octo-shark, really?’

‘For all you know. Please stop touching things.’

Susan was filling Aldridge in on their adventure while they waited for the Doctor to wake after his operation.

‘So we put the children back in their house and left the soldier on guard outside the door. With any luck they will think the whole episode was a dream.’

‘The curse is broken,’ said Aldridge. ‘I don’t know why that family didn’t just move. There’s not

exactly a shortage of houses in London town, especially for rich folk.’

Susan began putting rings from a tray on each finger, eventually managing to fit thirty rings on her hands. ‘Tell me, Mr Aldridge. How do you do that trick with your beard bristles?’

Aldridge bristled, as he usually did when bristle comments were

passed.

‘The beard trick is a discipline. All you need to do is practise and drink a very diluted glass of poison every night. Now will you please put those rings back on the tray? I’m running a business, you know, not a toy shop.’

Moaning drifted from the back room followed by a long bout of coughing.

‘Where is she?’ said the Doctor’s voice. ‘Susan?’

Susan quickly stripped off the rings and dumped them in the tray.

‘It’s Grandfather. He’s awake.’

She hurried behind the screen to find the Doctor already sitting up on a soldier’s cot, surrounded by an array of highly sophisticated equipment, which had been disguised as everyday Victorian objects.

Someone once tried to use what he thought was a commode, Aldridge had told Susan in an attempt

to stop her touching things. And had the two sides of his bottom sutured together.

‘Here I am, Grandfather,’ said Susan. ‘Everything is fine.’

The Doctor’s panic disappeared as though blown away by a gust of wind.

‘Good, child. Good. I had such dreams under the anaesthetic. Such nightmares. Now I wake to find

you beside me and I can hardly remember what those nightmares were.’

Aldridge appeared around the screen. ‘Such poetry, such effusiveness. It’s enough to make an old

surgeon shed a tear.’

The Doctor scowled. ‘I presume the transplant was a success, Aldridge?’

‘That hand will last longer than you, provided you don’t let some pirate slice it off,’ said Aldridge.

The Doctor held up his left hand, examining it closely. The only sign of surgery was a thick pink

line around the wrist.

‘It was touch and go there for a while,’ said Aldridge. ‘You nearly regenerated twice.’

‘Hmmm,’ said the Doctor, and then: ‘Hmmmmmm.’

Aldridge elbowed Susan. ‘He does the whole hmmmm routine when he’s looking for faults, but can’t

find any.’

The Doctor sat up, then stood, holding the hand out to Susan for inspection.

‘Tell me, Granddaughter. What do you think?’

Susan pinched his palm and pulled on the fingers one by one.

‘Honestly, Grandfather,’ she said. ‘It looks a little big to me.’

EPILOGUE

On that bitter night when the Doctor battled Igby on the rooftop overlooking Hyde Park, a man sat

alone on a bench in Kensington Gardens. He was sombre-faced with a high forehead and large kind

eyes.

An author by trade, he’d found some little success in the theatre, but had not yet found the spark of a magical idea that could elevate him to the status of his friend Arthur Conan Doyle.

The young writer tugged on his moustache, a nervous habit, and looked to the stars for inspiration.

What he saw there lasted for the merest blink of an eye and he would often wonder if it had indeed happened or if his imagination had brewed it up to set him on the road to literary immortality.

What he thought he saw was this:

Children surrounded by stardust flying into the night.

Two people fighting on a rooftop.

One was perhaps a pirate and the other seemed to have a hook for a hand.

The writer sat stunned for perhaps half an hour until the cold seeped through the seat of his trousers, then he pulled some scraps of paper from his pocket, chewed the top of his pencil stub, and began to write.

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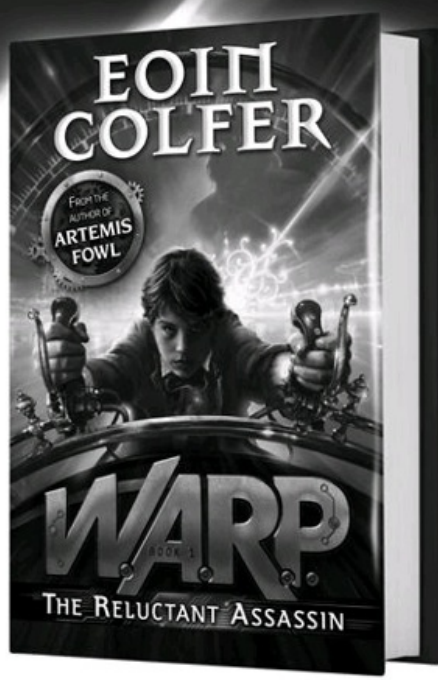

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